

The Steel Band 'Arrives'

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Lago Employees Combine Musical, Metal-Smith Skills

"Drums that became pianos and guitars," a musical instrument salesman would exclaim. "You'd never find them in our store."

He'd be right! You wouldn't!

But you would find them in the 'steel bands' that today are sending a new type of music swinging over the Caribbean. And in the front ranks of these musical revolutionaries are some Lago employees and — incidentally — some Lago oil drums.

By skillfully cutting and tempering these drums — and mastering the resulting instrument — these men are today producing music which one fellow worker said "sounds like a whole group of pianos; a bunch of organs."

This band of musical metal-smiths is headed by a 32-year-old native of Trinidad named Lennard Turner. Mr. Turner and 40 to 50 fellow Trinidadians arrived at Aruba in 1945 and, in his own words, "we didn't have any entertainment."

So he cast about for some form of amusement and recalled the 'steel bands' which were becoming so popular at home. Though Mr. Turner knew little of the mechanics of drawing the musical scale from the bottom of an oil drum, he recruited a group of young men and they started experimenting.

With hacksaws they cut down the drums to where only the bottom and four to six inches of the sides remained, then started tempering the bottoms and beating out the areas which would eventually produce the notes.

Equipped with instruments, the men started teaching themselves to play as individuals and then to play as members of a band.



LAYING OUT THE 'PIANO'

NOTES: Using a can of shoe polish as an ink well, Vincent Bacchus starts marking out the notes of the band's piano. Mr. Bacchus came to Aruba eight months ago from Trinidad where he played with the Trinidad "Invaders."

'LINEANDO' E DRUM: Cu un angua di staal, Tom Wilson ta 'linea' e notanan marcando nan cu indentacionnan skerpi. 'Lineamento' ta permiti e tocador pa slem e area den e nota sin afecta tono di e otro nota.

They had no music — in fact, none was written in those days — but they literally "pounded away," producing more perfect instruments and more perfect renditions of the sambas, rumbas and other local music which made up their first repertoire.

Experimented Constantly

"As we played, we experimented all the time," Mr. Turner said. "We worked on new songs, made new instruments and tried to make the ones we had better."

Turning an oil drum bottom into a tympanic organ "is the toughest part of the whole thing," Mr. Turner said. "Tempering is everything."

'Steel bands' are made up of one more 'pianos,' second pianos, trams, guitars (also called 'grumblers'), troon booms, high booms and 'basses.'

Suppose a fellow decides to make a 'piano,' one of the most difficult — because of its 21 notes — instruments in the band. The apprentice pianist first cuts off a drum four to five inches from the bottom and then, on the inside of the bottom, marks off 21 areas for notes.

"The fellow heats the drum over a wood fire and then hammers out the notes from the inside," Mr. Turner explained. "Then he heats the drum up again and tempers each note until it sounds like what he wants. He tries to get the metal in the notes just a little softer than the rest of the drum."

Tuning Is Exacting

The work is slow and exacting. "You can't hurry," according to Mr. Turner. "If you rush them and punch them you break them." And relatively few of the hundreds of 'steel band' musicians across the Caribbean are adept at the art of tuning — a technique which requires a sculptor's touch with a hammer and perfect pitch.

In order to achieve the proper tone, the tuner hammers the metal. Striking on one side and then on the other, he taps the metal back and forth until — when struck — it gives off the note he is searching.

Just as the length, diameter, and 'stretch' of a piano string determine its vibrating sound, so do the length, width and tautness of a drum 'piano' note set its tone.

The center of the drum produces the lowest sound. Those notes in the immediate perimeter of the center are the highest pitched while those forged along the rim of the drum are intermediate.

Trinidadians, who pioneered the 'steel band' after they found bent oil drum bottoms produced different tones, started out by marking off a drum in quarters which produced four different notes. Experimentation led to the instruments of greater range they — and Mr. Turner's "Aruba All-Star Boys" — play today.



AND THE BAND PLAYED ON: With the drums in tune and three-year-old Carlos Richardson handling the maracas, five of the Aruba All-Star Boys warm up with a backyard afternoon 'jam session.' Left to right they are Ernest Richardson, Lennard (Shoo-Shoo Baby) Turner, leader of the band, Harold Craig, Tom Wilson and Vincent Bacchus.

Y E BANDA TA TOCA: Cu e drumnan prestem y Carlos Richardson di tres aña trahando cu e maracaanan, cinco tocador di Aruba All-Star Boys ta practica dos oranan di atardi. Di rebez pa drechi nan ta Ernest Richardson, Lennard (Shoo-Shoo Baby) Turner, lider di e conjunto, Harold Craig, Tom Wilson y Vincent Bacchus.

The six-to-eight-inch high 'second piano' circa 1953, has 15 notes, the 'trams' and the 'grumbler' have nine each while the basses — which use almost the whole drum — have four each.

"With a little practice the beginner can play 'Slow Boat To China' or 'Tennessee Waltz' or 'Springtime In The Rockies'. A guy who's good can rip off Schubert's 'Serenade'," according to Mr. Turner.

Music Now Written

In Trinidad, where 30 to 40-piece steel bands are not uncommon and an all-star aggregation leads the annual carnival parade, they're playing to music written and arranged specially for the steel band.

Some of the Trinidad soloists carry their instruments in cases in which the humedity is controlled, and tune them with hammers as finely balanced as a rivetsmith's.

Without music, the would-be band

member "starts picking out the notes, and then he tries to play a song he knows," Mr. Turner said.

In addition to turning out his own instrument, the fellow who hopes to someday "rip off Schubert's 'Serenade'" has to make the sticks with which the instrument is played.

"He gets a stick and then cuts some strips, say, from a bicycle tire tube and then he wraps them — not so hard and not so soft — around the end of the sticks and ties them," Mr. Turner explained.

"Steel bands" have become tremendously popular. They play at dances, at Carnivals, accompany calypso contests and make fast-selling recordings.

"We're going to keep on experimenting," Mr. Turner — who is known professionally as "Shoo-Shoo Baby" — said. "Someday I'd like to take them back to Trinidad and show those fellows back home what a steel band should sound like."